

PLENUM: *Security is an illusion: encoding fragility.*
Nancy Mauro-Flude

01. Intro

PLENUM allows you to experience the significance of software and its ability to consciously design environments which shapes social patterns and relationships. An open invitation for people to 'inhabit' along side each other is pivotal to the experience. It addresses the cultural aspect of the Free Software debate over copyright, creativity and intellectual property in a live performance installation. You are apart of an emerging exchange not just about conceptions of net culture and media arts but the interaction via the software is reflected during the dialogue itself. It places priority on group agendas whilst the durational timeframe ruptures the rational coherency of a formal social-political debate. As you digest the sound, food and drink, raw dialogue is processed and pushed through this network. Agendas are compressed and rendered. Knowledge exchange is live algorithmic process where different propositions are brought forth.

0.2. Main

*In the frame of 12 hours, 5 acts, 2 interludes, a sensual realm of poetic politics unfolds. As you ascend the staircase and enter the Limehouse TownHall, you become an actor immersed within the *mise en scene*, a variable of the ensemble. While the event points to net culture and media arts, in the context of NodeL programme, PLENUM also addresses how these function within larger contemporary society. Specifically addressing NodeL as a successful porthole and clearing house for new media arts, a man in tweed hat asks: *But what about my level of autonomy and sustaining my own freedom?* On entering some people need direction and ask: *What do "they" expect from me?* In due time *they* dissolves into *we* because here anything goes. What one encounters is an evolving fluid and fragmented series of conversations around the statement initially posed by the MC MISTRIX:*

Whither net culture/media arts today.

By Act Four a core of individual, autonomous actors emerge. A myriad of discussions take place, from reflections about the discrete art object, to engaging with the actual technical specificity of a wireless network, to a hope for a broader understanding and more nuanced language in order to engage with media art;

- How do we relate to experience rather than product?*
- We need a many-festo!*
- I came because of the sheer incomprehensibility of the publicity around PLENUM. It was a relief from catch phrases such as outreach, engagement, sustainability, reworking of conversations and bandied about terms. I'm so tired of all this middle management speak.*
- Do we need media arts as a term?*
- There was once a hierarchy within the media arts scene i.e. who is more tech than the others, it is becoming better now.*
- It was always better off for me to stay on the periphery of media arts.*

Participants position themselves in roles that are continually re-negotiated in a dynamic structure. In these following statements, we can get a tiny glimpse into the encoding processes being acted out in the event:

- *Can we all just realize who of us here are dominating the discussion?*
- *Make sure that we all get a chance to speak our points: I noticed it because I tend to talk a lot.*
- *People are starting to act like the software; this process is the most remarkable thing.*

This self-reflexive environment begins to expand and reflect the software used. Microphones are positioned throughout the space and feed through a central mixer. Pure Data [Pd] patchers process the conversations, and output them into the environment.

This is a dynamic site of information, exchange, discussion, contestation, organisation, ideas, thoughts and display of perseverance, around the emerging importance of new technologies within social spaces created by software. A manifold of perspectives are engendered by the questions raised by the body of the participants, who group and regroup in a collective decision making framework:

Wrapping up 'ACT FOUR: The emperor's new clothes'. A man in a tweed hat, addresses the remaining collective of about 5 or 6 participants (I name these as *Players*):

Question: Who is going to sum it all up and take it further? Who will be our spokesperson?

Answer: Why do we need a spokesperson anyway? This is just representative democracy.

Knowledge is shared within a mix of contemplation and endurance, people operate at their limit whilst engaging in anchoring dialogue. What follows is a brief example where a dancer (fourth player) engages in a conversation with a programmer (third player):

FORTH PLAYER

*We are fragile about our positions. We are inherently full of questions.
If we were all very confident we wouldn't be here.*

THIRD PLAYER

*Security is an illusion,
We have to encourage fragility,
In situations where we feel fragile, we question ourselves and learn.*

FORTH PLAYER

*We are scared of commitment, because we are not sure of our position.
We need to provide infrastructures for security.
Shall we all go to bed now?*

PD PATCHERS' SOUND BEGINS TO INTENSIFY, CONVERSATION BECOMES INCOMPREHENSIBLE

I attended the event as a note-taker in order to document the structure of the meeting, introduce other techniques of engagement, summarize the current state of the discussion and so on. The participatory model is reinserted and folded back into the event engineered by KOP and XXXXX, whose impetus is to continue a conversation about the state of new media practice in a public event, but also to see how a self-reflective, collaborative rule-making environment can

be encoded. This performance installation seemed at times to me like a contemporary form of political cabaret. As expressions of the public are processed and worked back into the space *via* abstraction which distances the players and prevents identification in favor of awareness.

What exactly is performance in this context? How does it relate to software? The formality of the acts blend into loose informality which people responded to in the moment:

ACT FOUR:

FORTH PLAYER begins to teach a dance class to the other willing participants

She begins with how to do a classical ballet plie`

PD PATCHER floods the room with disco music

The woman stops the class and begins to dance freely.

I am struck by the juxtaposition and layering of action and thinking; a convergence of these nebulous shifts which mix reality and illusion, software, performance and agendas. As with most social events a wide variety of foreknowledge's, agendas, abilities and prejudices were brought to PLENUM. Players cast aspersions across the room: *That's vanguard capitalism! The sound people are fascists!*, then return to a shrugging functionality of need – real, blatant and irreverent.

We see how the sound rubs up against language, an antagonism that agitates the semiotic calm of logical progression;

ACT THREE: Trade for power.

Actors are taking turns on the microphones, working through the agendas vying their points of view. A player asks:

This might be a conservative thing to say but I have an aesthetic question, I wonder 'what the Art is' in Node London, as when I look at the work I'm not feeling very poetic.

Another woman quickly walks in a strong sudden and direct manner to the microphone ring...

The PD PATCHERS' SOUND LAYERS OVER THE CONVERSATION

This example shows how some people begin to explore the possibilities towards a genuine exchange, which is grounded in experience of the event. The sound is an information environment tracking a dictionary of atmospheres, tracing tangents and pursuing the pointers in the network. Similarly R.W. Fassbinder (1992), explains how in his films he specifically gestures to noise that constantly washes over us from people, television, radios, and the street;

Someone wrote about the film that you can't always make out what's being said because it's drowned out by the background noise, the loudspeakers, the radio and television announcements...But that's just what I wanted to point out, not really the thinking of the individual characters, who are completely secondary in comparison to the climate of noise and racket they live in. The terrorism doesn't consist in my reproducing all that; rather it's the media, which constantly hammer away at people, who in the meantime have become so hooked and helpless that by

now they can't even manage to push a button to get some peace and quiet.

Similarly the programming of the sound in Pd software during PLENUM ruptures conversation and gives multiple levels of meaning relative to the determining elements of the communication. It breathes through the evening and maintains its fundamental position in the map of agendas and questions which manifest into a climax during Act four.

ACT FOUR:

FORTH PLAYER RUNS pulls the plug, disconnects the electricity to the computers processing the sound and exits

PD PATCHER re plugs in the machine, it switches back on. He turns it up to full volume

ACT Five: Walk the dog

The Pd patchers are invited to come into the centre to explain how they were manipulating the players.

The moment the machines are unplugged – it is as if then the evening would die. Does the action of unplugging the sound by player four reveal the status quo in the event? Either way it teases its features into high relief, for a moment silence floods the room. The act by its nature is a protest and simultaneously a reflection of the software. In its excessiveness to cut off an aspect of feedback the norm attempts to protect itself.

The participants that last until ACT FIVE tap into their last reserves. True to the scripts' command: *The repository is symbolically drained*. They collect what little is left of themselves, pull together in the spirit of effort mutualisation.

03. Conclusion

PLENUM generates a lot of communication and interaction in the setting it provides. This event is a transformative process, a mutual apprehension of a series of acts, patches, scripts, conditions and discussions as a means for speaking and thinking, between each other, and ultimately, perhaps the extent to which this may contribute to the nascent stutterings of the hoped for conversation with the larger public sphere. Here we experience an expandable software model for collaborative communication, a practice that is concerned with ontological, as well as, social and political issues. I would wish to argue that a profound re-coding of awareness and perception is what is required if we are to confront some outdated human legacies that are resistant to mobilisation. This structure brought forth new considerations that simultaneously shift the limits of individual articulation and critical embodiment. It allowed me to experience the significance of software as consciously designed landscapes that shape social patterns and relationships. PLENUM's setting is intentionally autocratic, understood by some participants in semantic extremes: *This is a Boot Camp!* or even *This reminds me of those Trance Parties in Goa in the early 90s*. Perhaps it can be said that to fully understand the particular model of intensification introduced by KOP and XXXXX was as an event where you may begin to fully comprehend what the meaning of freedom is, notwithstanding the whole debate around free software and how this actually relates to operating systems in daily life.

What kind of environment is best for cultivating freedom and human wellbeing? This question is becoming increasingly urgent. A question that can only be acknowledged in commitment and suspension of judgment. Making complex

interconnections at a specific site overtime has a profound impact. On one hand not only did this event touch upon the degradation of a free society, it also revealed social injustice, ignorance, and hypocrisy:

MISTRIX and NOTETAKERS encourage PLAYERS to make three final topics and groups:
MISTRIX

New Europe has arrived

NEW PLAYERS ARRIVE AND FORM A NEW CLUSTER. They begin to speak in their first language; many different languages are circulated and used in response to agenda items. NOTE TAKERS REPEAT THE AGENDAS ON THE BOARD AND ASK PEOPLE TO BEGIN TO CLUSTER INTO 3 TOPIC GROUPS IN ORDER TO CONTINUE THE DISCUSSION. PLAYERS PITCH THEIR TOPICS THE LOUDEST IS HEARD.

PLAYER:

I hate Ars Electronica its like a Mercedes Benz logo.

Just get out there and do it

It took us 10 years for people to start listening to us

You might be 30000 pounds in debit but we are working with all different types of cultural sectors, street kids etc.

PLAYERS AGENDA'S COMPRESSION OF TOPICS WHITE BOARD:

1#Relevance – presence

2#Lexicon – multi-lingual inclusion/exclusion

3#Real-play

4#Infrastructures– event driven models

If the practice of an event such as PLENUM opens our way of seeing, doing, understanding and being in together in a place, then it has important implications for us at this stage of history as we begin to learn to live with greed induced crisis. As the late visionary writer, Kathy Acker (1997) reminded us:

Primarily because my friends were artists. Musicians, painters, performance artists, filmmakers, dancers anything but writers. We hung out together, shared problems and misery. Usually poverty, though I'm not sure poverty's shareable, fucked each other, and lived together. Later on I wrote some publications: all of these articles rose, first out of friendship. Friendship and an inclination for what I call *joy*.

The formalised excercise of PLENUM leads me to place a final emphasis upon expandable software and its role within the model of the event. I heard recently from Evelina Domnitch a Russian artist that the best ruler is the one who does her work without anyone knowing that she exists. Is it the software used in the event or the model that creates the portal of perception? Or both? Nowadays how often do people come together and dissolve in communal joy? What is freedom? Is this joy what we call true freedom and is it the responsibility of net culture and media artists to create environments that encode this?

"NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION EXCEPT on the networked_performance blog".

References:

Acker, Kathy. 1997. *Bodies of Work: Essays*. London: Serpents Tail.

Fassbinder, Rainer Werner. 1992. *The Anarchy of the Imagination: Interviews, Essays, Notes*. The Johns Hopkins University Press